

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***
*** Number 64: Deja Vu, Again ***

Deja.com is one of the Internet's most useful sites -- but you might not know it by looking at its home page. The site's best feature, a massive archive of newsgroup discussions, is so hidden away that it's nearly invisible. It is as if the site's creators don't know what a great tool they've built.

Until a few weeks ago, Deja.com was known as Dejanews.com. With the name change came a site redesign, new features, and, if you ask me, a loss of direction for the site. Before, Dejanews was simple: a great tool for searching newsgroups. Now, Deja.com focuses on "ratings" and "discussions."

The site's best feature, the newsgroup archive, is still there. It holds a more-or-less complete archive of Usenet newsgroup discussions going back to March 1995. A typical Usenet news server keeps postings around for a week, or maybe two. Once those messages expire, they're gone -- so it's important that someone keeps those old messages around for posterity.

(You may not know much about newsgroups -- almost everything in the media is Web, Web, Web. Usenet Newsgroups are discussion forums that have been around for ages -- they were thriving long before the Web was even a glimmer in its creator's eye. There are tens of thousands of newsgroups, each with its own topic. For instance, comp.os.ms-windows.programmer.multimedia is the newsgroup for discussion of multimedia programming on Microsoft Windows. Rec.sport.jetski is for talk about jetskis, and ba.personals is for personals ads in the San Francisco Bay Area.)

The site archives 45,000 local, national, and international newsgroups. They say the archive weighs in at 300 million messages and 500 gigabytes of disk space.

You can search recent postings -- those written in the past two weeks -- or the complete collection going back to 1995. With that much discussion to sift through, it pays to use Deja's "Power Search" tool, which allows you to limit searches to a certain range of dates, a particular newsgroup, even to posts in a certain language. When searching the full archive, it helps to use a very specific search: "Windows bugs" won't produce useful hits, but "Microsoft Office 98 word processor crash" might give you what you need. Likewise, "Volkswagen Beetle" might be too general, where "Volkswagen Beetle turbo miles per gallon" might give you the information you want with less noise.

When you find a message that's interesting, you can read the rest of the posts in that discussion by pressing the "thread" button. You can also set up a "My Deja" account that you can use to track your favorite newsgroups and post your own messages.

There's something to keep in mind when reading Usenet: these are discussions that take place between lots of different people with many opinions. What you find may not, in fact, be facts. So read the information you find with a cynical eye. (Come to think of it, this rule counts for the Web, too.)

As if 45,000 newsgroups weren't enough, Deja also provides space for its own communities: discussion areas that are available only at Deja. So, on the off-chance that there isn't a newsgroup focused on the subject you want to talk about,

you can create a Deja community of your own.

-.-.- Ratings -.-.-

Since the site makes such a big deal about its new ratings feature, I'll talk about it, too. Deja Ratings allows you to share your opinion and feedback concerning products, services, and a variety of other topics, with others. "When you rate items, you help others make better, more informed decisions," the site says.

So you can rate trucks. Rate country albums. Rate universities. Rate democratic hopefuls. And so on. Each topic can have several criteria: for instance, when you are rating foreign sports cars, you can give your opinion about each car's performance, reliability, sex appeal, and cost/benefit. If you feel moved to say more, you can write comments about that car, album, school, or whatever. Then, you can see others' opinions and comments about those topics.

Reading others' opinions on such a variety of topics can be interesting -- comments range from insightful to stupid. I suppose if you were shopping for a country album, car, or university, the ratings might help you make a more informed decision. But when the site asks you to rate comediennes or National League first basemen, one begins to suspect that the whole ratings concept, while mildly entertaining, isn't really so useful.

=*=*= RELEVANT WEB SITES =*=*=

Deja.com: <http://www.deja.com>

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Got comments or ideas for future issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

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